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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a five-step model intended to meet the needs of gifted students in the context of the mixed ability reality that most teachers in regular classrooms encounter. The model consists of five steps each of which has several components. The steps and components are: (1) acceptance (initiatives must start out small and sound to be successful, must focus on "cans" rather than "can'ts", and must recognize various learning patterns, styles, and rates); (2) classroom climate (should be child centered, active, open and respectful); (3) knowledge of content objectives (including the course of study, the role of textbooks, and a wide variety of resources and materials); (4) learning activities (characterized by flexible pacing, both acceleration and enrichment options, and use of interdisciplinary theme units); and (5) evaluation (use of alternative methods by a variety of individuals to evaluate both observable and nonobservable domains). (DB)

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Classroom Strategies for Meeting Multiple Needs: A Five-Step Model

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Introduction

When most individuals, educators included, consider ways to meet the needs of gifted children, they often think of special programs or classes in which gifted students are grouped homogeneously. Only upon reflection do educators look to the regular classroom as a source of appropriate programming for highly able youngsters. Yet it is in the thousands of elementary and secondary classrooms across the nation that most gifted students spend the majority of their school careers. Thus, it is vital that *all* educators learn to implement classroom strategies that benefit the most talented students they teach.

It has been traditional for gifted education specialists and regular classroom teachers to exist in separate worlds, despite the fact that they often share common students. The walls between regular classrooms and gifted programs are quite distinct and little, if anything, has been accomplished to diminish this gap. Gifted labels have been attached too securely to instructional practices such as simulations and independent study.

It is now time to break down the walls that force gifted students to make distinctions between classroom requirements and gifted options. The field of gifted education has much to share, and regular classrooms have much to offer. Active and constructive partnerships between gifted program teachers and regular classroom teachers would strengthen the total educational program for gifted students while simultaneously offering sophisticated and enhanced learning opportunities to all students.

Gifted education specialists must take the lead and share practices common to their field with regular classroom teachers. However, before educators of the gifted begin to inform their regular education counterparts of the benefits of such practices as Bloom's Taxonomy and Creative Problem Solving, they must judiciously avoid the common misconception that regular classroom teachers are ignorant of these "higher-level" strategies. To assume that teachers need to be taught certain skills implies that they do not use them already.

In most cases, however, yesterday's enrichment has become today's standard curriculum, and the professionals who implement such curriculum must be recognized for their efforts in delivering instruction that is appropriate to individual students' learning rates and styles. Only when gifted education specialists and classroom teachers perceive themselves as partners do the most highly able students achieve the personal and academic success commensurate with their talents.

So many children, so little time! Gifted students are not the only group of students whose abilities require modification of existing curricula. As every classroom teacher knows, the range of abilities in most classrooms covers the broadest possible spectrum. Thus, while it would be appropriate in this chapter to focus on ways to modify the curriculum and instruction specifically for identified gifted students, such a tactic would ignore the reality of heterogeneity that exists in most classrooms. In addition, it would also ignore the fact that identification procedures are not without their limitations. These numbers games, more often than not, dismiss some

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very talented students whose abilities also warrant some specialized curriculum modifications.

This chapter focuses on a model that takes into account the "mixed-ability reality" that most teachers encounter. This model also makes several assumptions:

- Teachers are competent.
- Attitudinal shifts often must precede instructional changes.
- No single learning activity or curriculum change will satisfy the needs of gifted students; rather a comprehensive and well-articulated program is required.
- Nothing worthwhile is achieved without effort.

Five-Step Model for Enhanced Learning

The five-step model for enhanced learning, developed by Deborah S. Delisle, incorporates practices long regarded as staples in the field of gifted education directly into regular classrooms. By doing so, the model seeks to eliminate the fragmentation often found in overall programming for gifted students. More often than not, only a few grade levels are included in a gifted program, and the daily lives of highly able students in regular classrooms are overlooked. Perhaps one of the most rewarding outcomes of this model is that the implementation of valuable and effective practices initially intended for gifted students raises the standard of the classroom program, thereby impacting *all* students.

The model consists of five steps: acceptance, classroom climate, knowledge of content and objectives, learning activities, and evaluation (see Figure 1). Movement from one step to the next implies both an acceptance and practice of the key elements. The steps decrease in height because as changes are made, it becomes somewhat easier to accept new ideas and incorporate changes in instructional practices. Every step has three distinct components, each of which contributes to the strength of that particular step.

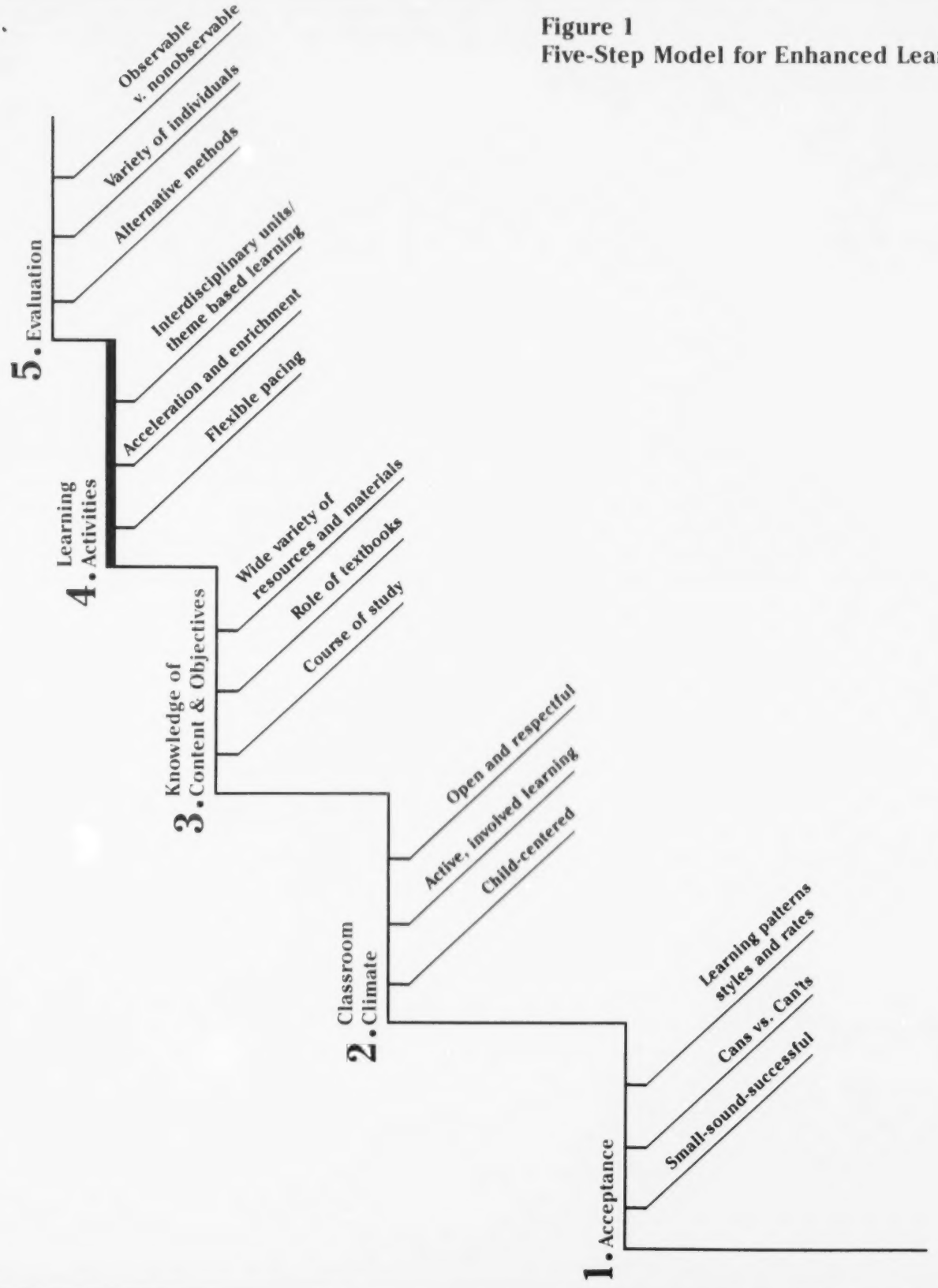
Acceptance

An awareness that change can be healthy and constructive allows an educator to take the first step: **acceptance.** In the past, educators in the field of gifted education have attempted to make too many changes at once in classrooms. Worse yet are those situations in which finger pointing at the inadequacies of regular curriculum have not been followed by significant and constructive plans for change. As a result, change has not always been as rapid or as productive as anticipated. Regular classrooms had then been evaluated as being unable to meet the needs of gifted children. Thus, it is imperative to recognize that there is simply no quick, efficient method for making every classroom more effective. Initiatives requiring change in philosophies and practices must initially be *small* and *sound* in order to be *successful.*

Classroom teachers recognize that the *learning patterns, styles,* and *rates* of all children vary greatly, even within self-contained classes of gifted students. As new curriculum is written, learning activities must translate this recognition into everyday practice. Additionally, enhanced learning will only occur if attention is focused on the *cans* as opposed to the *can'ts.*

A former colleague often complained about all of the activities that couldn't be accomplished in the classroom because there were too many students, 31 in number, in the class. Seven years later, this teacher had 20 students and a part-time aide but still complained about not being able to accomplish various tasks. Just what parameters would have satisfied this

Figure 1
Five-Step Model for Enhanced Learning



teacher? The reality of education today is that there will never be enough time, money, or resources to satisfy everyone's agenda. It is imperative, therefore, to decide what can be accomplished and then establish a sequence of activities designed to achieve those outcomes.

Classroom Climate

An openness to critically analyze what actually occurs in the classroom will allow progression to the second step: **classroom climate.** Inherent in this step is a conscious respect for individual children's strengths. *Child-centered* classrooms place children first and subjects second, even at the secondary level. Such environments welcome gifted students. Practices in these climates tend to be flexible and shy away from molding students to a predetermined set of guidelines and expectations.

When a child-centered teacher asks the class to tell what they already know about a topic they are just approaching, arms are opened wide as the teacher says, "I respect what you bring into my classroom." When the teacher next asks the students what they want to discover about this topic, a pat is given on the back to each of them that says, "I value your interests." Teachers who give such messages to students inspire students to learn; they demonstrate support for thinking and pursuing knowledge. Students would benefit greatly if each teacher did some annual "spring cleaning," questioned old habits, and cleaned out the cobwebs of long-adopted practices.

A spirit of inquiry prevails in classrooms when learning is viewed as an *active* process. *Why* becomes the most important word as hands-on activities actively engage curious minds. Long considered a staple of gifted programs, simulations, for example, can be incorporated into regular classrooms. Simulations permit the required curriculum to become infused with appropriate enrichment materials. A simulation such as "Mummy's Message" would enhance a study of ancient Egypt while offering heightened interest for students. Such provisions as this give all students, including gifted students, many opportunities to explore and delve more deeply into content.

Knowledge of Content and Objectives

A willingness on the part of classroom teachers to explore new avenues of instruction serves as the catalyst for placement in the third step: **knowledge of content and objectives.** One of the loudest cries often heard is that regular classroom teachers are burdened by their responsibility for covering the *course of study.* However, the course of study should not be viewed as a hindrance, but rather as a constructive teaching tool from which the teacher can create dynamic lessons. By molding the course of study to specific content, teachers can meet the needs of even the most able students.

For example, a fourth grade course of study might indicate that students are to "identify how a volcano erupts." The teacher can incorporate this objective into a challenging question for the gifted students: "Can a volcano be suppressed?" Such a question does not require a tremendous amount of additional planning on the part of the teacher, yet it yields a challenge to highly capable students. By tackling such a question, the gifted students will have satisfied the required objective (they would have to know how a volcano erupts in order to determine whether or not it can be suppressed), while also being exposed to the topic on a much more in-depth basis than the remainder of the class.

Further scrutiny of the course of study will demonstrate that skills can be integrated across content areas. Thus, when a gifted student has demonstrated a keen interest in science, reading skills can be covered simultaneously as the student researches scientific journals and periodicals about

recent discoveries in genetic engineering. Such deviations within lesson plans serve to stimulate other students in the classroom as they are exposed to various aspects of topics. Sharing among students becomes commonplace, and lessons are not segmented between the resource room and the classroom. Everyone wins!

While on this step, it is necessary to critically examine the role of *textbooks* in the classroom. As teachers evaluate available textbooks, it becomes quite evident that these books must be used only, if at all, as springboards for learning. The textbook is merely a tool and, like any other tool, its use should be limited rather than extensive. Perhaps more than any other educational material, textbooks cause the greatest source of frustration for gifted students. Continuous repetition and isolated skills can extinguish the thirst for new knowledge. If the text becomes *the* curriculum and is taught page-by page, day-by-day, it takes on a life of its own. As a springboard, however, it can open doors for students to pursue topics more extensively through the use of supplemental and current materials.

If gifted students are to benefit fully and richly from their learning environments, classroom teachers must incorporate *a wide variety of resources and materials* into their lessons. It is important to remember that some of the best resources might be just around the corner. For example, a senior citizens center might provide an array of mentors for students interested in World War II, or a local high school teacher might be willing to explore the theory of relativity with an eager fifth grader. Catalogs, current event stories, walking field trips, games, newspapers, peer teachers, sample copies of books, simulations, television programs, children's picture books, administrators, and parents are yet more examples of available and inexpensive resources. Such activities and resources can blend very well into the regular classroom curriculum while also providing enrichment opportunities for students. These avenues of learning must be explored in order to challenge and motivate highly able students.

Learning Activities

An initiative to truly incorporate meaningful and relevant learning into the classroom leads to the fourth step: **learning activities.** Using *flexible pacing,* teachers allow students to progress rapidly in those subject areas in which they have demonstrated proficiency. Thus, instructional groups within a classroom are not stagnant but are fluid as they respond to the strengths, interests, and talents of the students. Grouping and regrouping become second nature as teachers cluster students depending upon their proficiency in various content areas. Students progress through skills and content as mastery is achieved. When using flexible pacing, the required curriculum can be streamlined, or compacted, to enable the gifted student to pursue areas of interest in-depth, conduct independent study, or work with a mentor.

Flexible pacing incorporates both *acceleration* and *enrichment,* two educationally sound practices that can serve useful roles within a classroom. Acceleration will challenge students to pursue content at higher levels more rapidly than their classmates. Enrichment will broaden students' perspective and expand their understanding of the world around them. Successful incorporation of enrichment in the classroom requires careful planning, of course, and goals must be clearly delineated. If logic problems are inserted into a Friday afternoon class for the sake of filling a 15-minute gap, enrichment has not taken place. Instead, teachers need to recognize the difference between these "fillers" and those activities that are clearly connected to content being studied.

By developing questions consciously designed to stretch minds, teachers can increase the likelihood that the needs of gifted students will be met in the regular classroom. For example, "What if the Civil War had never been fought?" is the type of question that can send students into an in-depth scrutiny of our nation's history. In the process, students will not only gain basic required facts and meet the objectives of the course of study, but they will begin also to sense history beyond a mere collection of dates and wars. The Civil War, thus reviewed, becomes known for the moral, social, and intellectual context of its era rather than it being a set of battles, generals, dates, and casualties to be memorized.

Interdisciplinary units can provide a flexible framework in which gifted students make viable connections across themes and disciplines. Outside of the confines of a school building, it is readily apparent that real life is just not neatly segmented into compartments like the schedules traditionally followed at schools. On Saturday, mathematics does not begin at 9:00 A.M. nor does the nightly news isolate the world's events into specific content areas. If children are to be prepared for the world-at-large, curricula must be designed to articulate connections across themes and contents. For example, "The Concept of Culture" is a theme that enables students to examine such topics as the family, assignment of roles, courtship and marriage, educational patterns, religious constructs, and art. As the students engage in research, their discoveries force them to weave ideas and facts through various disciplines while making viable connections across eras of history. The curriculum is strengthened by a thoughtful, comprehensive mosaic of learning activities.

Satisfaction with changes in learning activities often leads to changes in **evaluation,** the last step of the model. This is perhaps the easiest step because changes in learning activities naturally invite *alternative methods* of evaluating student performance. Portfolios, videotapes, narratives, debates, checklists, student contracts, and rating scales can often yield important information about students, as opposed to letter grades that provide little concrete information. "What was particularly informative about my speech?" "Which vocabulary words strengthened my ideas?" "What argument was most supportive of my research?" None of these questions is answered by a letter grade. Evaluation must provide the feedback required for students themselves to be able to determine their own growth.

Just as the scope of the learning environment must expand to include sophisticated topics and learning activities, so too the evaluation of student performance must be expanded to include *individuals other than the classroom teacher.* As topics become more specialized, students need to receive feedback from individuals who have expertise in that specialty. Once again, the imagination of teachers will expand the scope of available people to help in the evaluation process.

A fifth grader who has recently completed a study on the theory of relativity may not have local access to an expert in the field of physics. However, a little ingenuity can lead to a wonderful source of inspiration for this budding scientist. Following an initial phone call by the teacher, the student could mail a copy of a research project, along with an audio cassette tape, to a university professor. The tape might include the student's thoughts, questions, or ideas. The professor would then respond on the cassette tape and critique the student's work. This process would not only serve as an additional means of evaluation but also would provide a valuable mentor to a curious mind.

Some of the most critical elements of the learning process cannot be easily evaluated because they exist in the *nonobservable domain.* Nonetheless, they must not be separated from the evaluation process. A question such as "What did you learn about yourself as a result of this study?" allows students to reflect on their own growth. Comments such as "I learned that I can stick with one project for a very long time," "I learned to appreciate my talents as a writer," or "I realized that I can be too bossy in a group" all reflect critical, albeit unobservable, lessons of life. More important, perhaps, than the facts that students learn are these self-analyses that contribute to the overall development of our students. As such, it is very important that every teacher take the time to ask questions that prompt students to reflect on the personal components of learning.

Conclusion

Some people believe that the easiest job in education is teaching gifted students. They believe that because these students are so smart, they will probably just "learn on their own." But most gifted students, as well-versed as they might be about a specific body of knowledge that interests them, still need the guidance of skilled teachers who understand how to develop their creative energies. Doing this, and doing it well, is a job not for the faint-at-heart; it requires stamina, ingenuity, and a willingness to take that extra step. Teachers must often become learners and also strive to remain visionaries despite the overwhelming responsibilities of daily classroom life.

The five-step model outlined in this chapter provides a flexible framework for educators who wish to incorporate gifted education strategies, materials, and philosophies into regular classrooms. Successfully integrated with basic curriculum, the elements of this model will help assure that gifted students' minds are challenged throughout the school day and the school year.

On a broader scale, programs for gifted students will become more expansive as classroom teachers become active participants in the education of gifted students. Given this model and its implications for the regular classroom, gifted education can indeed have a rippling effect on all children. Lastly, if a primary goal is educational excellence on a massive scale, educators must look deeply into the eyes of restructuring and become advocates for the appropriate education of *all* children.